

MESSAGE OF THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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The Mahābhārata (Mbh.) is essentially a narrative describing the battle between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas. The word *bhārata* (adj) primarily means '(a battle) fought by the Bharatas'.¹ Secondly, when applied to a text, the word means 'the narrative concerning the battle of the Bharatas', i.e. a *bhāratākhyāna*. The enlarged title *mahābhārata* means 'the great narrative of the battle of the Bharatas', i.e. a *mahābhāratākhyāna*.²

We are told that the events of the great war were described by Saṁjaya to Dhṛtarāṣṭra after he returned to Hāstinapura periodically from the battlefield. Presumably then the first narrative of the battle of the Bharatas was in the form of the reportings given by Saṁjaya to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Saṁjaya was present every day on the battlefield and was witness to the battle scenes. What is generally believed that Saṁjaya narrated to Dhṛtarāṣṭra the battle incidents from a long distance in the form of a running commentary is not correct. There is no basis for this misconception in the Mbh. Moreover, Saṁjaya did not report to Dhṛtarāṣṭra the battle incidents at the end of each day, but he reported to him the incidents in four instalments, first after the fall of Bhīṣma, i.e. after the first ten days of war, and then after the fall of Droṇa, Karṇa and, finally, when the whole battle was over.

To these basic reportings of the *saṁgrāma* were next added two more components, viz. the one that was related to the rift that occurred between the Kuru cousins and the subsequent loss of the kingdom by the Pāṇḍavas and

their twelve-year exile in the forest. These two components, which preceded the war, and the war itself, formed what may be called the 'nucleus' of the Mbh. which was recited for the benefit of Janamejaya by Vaiśampāyana.³ This was exactly what Janamejaya wanted to know and which Vaiśampāyana narrated to him. The king asked: *kathamī samabhavad bhedaḥ teṣāṁ akliṣṭakarmanām/ tac ca yuddhamī kathamī vṛttam* (1.54.19).⁴ To this question Vaiśampāyana replied: *śṛṇu rājan yathā bhedaḥ kurupāṇḍavayor abhūt/rājyārthe dyūtasambhūto vanavāśas tathaiva ca//yathā ca yuddham abhavat* (1.55. 4-5). This matter forms the subject of the *parvans* two to ten, i.e. from the Sabhāparvan to the Sautikāparvan (except perhaps the fourth, the Virāṭaparvan).

To these three basic components of the epic, viz. the *bheda* (arising out of *dyūta*), the *vanavāśa* and the *yuddha*, were added by many hands in the subsequent recitations of the epic throughout the centuries not only descriptions of incidents which preceded the *bheda* and which occurred after the *yuddha* - and which were in a way related to the main characters of the epic - but also much other matter, not related to the epic story. These additions were in the form of myths and legends, moral and didactic sections, and long philosophical tracts. Such additions are found mainly in the Ādi and the Āraṇyakaparvans and they also make up the two entire *parvans* called the Śānti and the Anuśāsana. The most important addition, of course, is the Bhagavadgītā section of the Bhīṣmaparvan. It is specially because of these additions that the Mbh. has acquired its present status as a śāstra. It is because of these additions

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that the Mbh. is in a position to proclaim: *dharme cārthe ca kāme ca mokṣe ca bhāratarṣabha/ yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kvacit//* (1.56.33; 18.5.38), i.e. "Concerning the four Puruṣārthas, *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*, whatever is found here will be found elsewhere and whatever is not found here will not be found anywhere".

The question before us is : does the basic epic poem, divested of its didactic and philosophical portions, have any value for us? Does it contain anything which will guide us to some extent in the achievement of the Puruṣārthas? To answer this question, let us for the present keep aside the fourth Puruṣārtha *mokṣa*, which after all is a later addition to the original three viz. *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*. Of these three, the *dharma* is the most important Puruṣārtha. Does the basic heroic poem have anything to tell us about the practice of *dharma*? If not, should the celebrated sage Vyāsa have taken all the trouble of describing in some details the major events of the Mbh. times which led, due to the behaviour of the characters taking part in them, to a very destructive war? Or did he have any purpose in doing this? Has he left through his composition any message for the posterity? If yes, what?

To my mind even the nucleus of the Mbh., divested of its didactic and philosophical tracts, has a message for the posterity. This message is related to the Puruṣārtha *dharma*. The epic tells us what it considers to be the *dharma*, as well as the *āpaddharma*, of a Kṣatriya. The message is made clear by certain incidents which form part of the nucleus of the epic.

Let us examine 'the nucleus' from this point of view.

A statement is found in the four stanzas which are collectively known as the Bhāratasāvitri (18.5.47-50). This statement is important for our today's theme. We know from the Mbh. that

Vyāsa taught his composition to his four pupils Sumantu, Jaimini, Paila and Vaiśampāyana and also to his son Śuka.⁵ We are also informed that Vyāsa, at the end, had composed the Bhāratasāvitri which he taught to his son Śuka.⁶ The first two stanzas of the Bhāratasāvitri contain the usual generalizations like, an individual in the worldly life, experiences usual family relationships (i.e. being a father, or a mother, a son, or a wife, etc.); while living this way he may come across thousands of occasions of joy and hundreds of occasions of fear. These experiences affect only the unwise, but not the wise.⁷ What concern us today are, however, the last two stanzas. Vyāsa emphasizes in them that the two Puruṣārthas *artha* and *kāma* flow from the Puruṣārtha *dharma*. He therefore wonders why a man does not take recourse to *dharma*. This simple truth Vyāsa proclaims with raised hands and in a loud voice, but, alas, nobody cares to listen to him.⁸ In the fourth and the last stanza of the Bhāratasāvitri, Vyāsa asserts that while *dharma* is eternal, happiness and grief are transitory. A man should not leave the path of *dharma* due to longing, fear, or greed, nor even to save his life.⁹

These stanzas which come at the end of the epic, when everything about the war from the beginning to the end has been said and done, emphasize in very clear terms the highest value Vyāsa attached to the path of *dharma*. They exhort a man not to forsake *dharma* even when his life was in danger. When we read this stanza on the background of the narration of the war, we cannot help remembering the two war incidents which seem, at first sight, clearly to contradict the teaching of Vyāsa. And the persons who act contrary to the exhortation of Vyāsa in those incidents are not the Kauravas, but the Pāṇḍavas, and the one who advises them to act contrary to *dharma* is none other than Kṛṣṇa himself who plays the role of their friend, philosopher and guide.

The first incident is the one which led to the

downfall of Droṇa. At one stage in the war, when Droṇa led the Kaurava army, he started killing the Pāṇḍāla army on such a large scale that the Pāṇḍavas, lost all hope of winning the war. They were afraid that Droṇa might succeed in killing them all.¹⁰ At that critical stage Kṛṣṇa, realizing the gravity of the situation, decided that it was necessary to do something very urgently to force Droṇa to retire from the battle for that day. He therefore told Arjuna that the Pāṇḍavas had to adopt some yoga, some expedient measure, to stop Droṇa from fighting, even if adopting that measure meant giving up the path of *dharma*. That had to be done to save them all from getting killed in the battle.¹¹ He also suggested to him what that expedient measure could be. He said that someone (not necessarily a Pāṇḍava) should declare within the hearing of Droṇa the false news of Aśvatthāman's death. Kṛṣṇa was sure that after hearing the sad news of his dear son's death, the depressed father would cease fighting and retire from the battle for the remaining part of that day.¹² That was all what Kṛṣṇa had desired to achieve by the circulation of the false news. When Droṇa heard the news he did not immediately believe it. He was not grieved, as expected by Kṛṣṇa. He did not believe the news of his son's death not because he knew his son was *cirajīvin* -- that idea is unknown to the Mbh. -- but because he knew his son's valour.¹³ Hence, instead of retiring from the battle, he continued fighting even more fiercely than before. A little later, however, he decided to ascertain the truth of what he had heard and proceeded towards Yudhiṣṭhira to question him. Kṛṣṇa immediately sensed the danger and urged Yudhiṣṭhira to tell untruth to Droṇa. He pointed out to Yudhiṣṭhira that if Droṇa did not retire from the battle for that day he would surely kill the entire army of the Pāṇḍavas. Kṛṣṇa pleaded with Yudhiṣṭhira to save all of them from Droṇa. He told Dharmarāja that on such critical occasions, untruth was superior to truth, and one who spoke untruth to save the life (of many) was not touched by untruth.¹⁴ This advice of Kṛṣṇa to Dharmarāja is

clearly in contrast to what Vyāsa preaches in his Bhāratasāvitri viz. *na... dharmam tyajej jīvitasyāpi hetoḥ* (18.5.50).

The second incident is related to the *gadāyuddha* between Bhīma and Duryodhana. After the fall of Śalya, Duryodhana, tired and disheartened, hid himself in a lake. When Yudhiṣṭhira challenged him to come out of the lake and fight, the latter accepted the challenge. He, however, asked for two concessions (which were really not concessions): one, time to put on his armour, and two, the Pāṇḍavas to fight with him singly and not all of them together. Yudhiṣṭhira readily agreed to both these requests and, in addition, granted very graciously to him two other choices: one, the choice of the weapon, and two, the choice of his opponent. He also promised Duryodhana that should the first Pāṇḍava with whom he chose to fight fall in the duel, none of the other Pāṇḍavas would step forward to continue the fight. The war would be deemed to have concluded in favour of Duryodhana and the entire kingdom would be his.

Kṛṣṇa severely criticized Yudhiṣṭhira for his thoughtless behaviour. Given the choice of weapon, Duryodhana was bound to choose *gadā* as he was well known for his skill in *gadāyuddha*. And if he were to exercise the second choice given to him and challenge any Pāṇḍava, except Bhīma, for a duel with *gadā*, the result could never be in doubt. That would mean disaster for the Pāṇḍavas. Even Arjuna could not have fought successfully a *gadā*-duel with Duryodhana. Yudhiṣṭhira again proved to be a reckless gambler. Once before he had agreed to gamble away his entire kingdom in a single stake in the game of dice,¹⁵ which he never played well and for which he was pitted against a rival like Śakuni who was infinitely superior to him in playing the game. Now, at the end of the battle, when the victory was almost at the door-step of the Pāṇḍavas he again staked his kingdom of Indra-

prastha for a single combat in which a skilled Duryodhana might have chosen to fight with a not-so-skilled Yudhiṣṭhira .

The Pāṇḍavas, however, were extremely lucky. Duryodhana refused to take advantage of the second choice given to him. He did not challenge any Pāṇḍava for a duel with *gadā*, as he considered them all inferior to him. Duryodhana, on the other hand, asked any Pāṇḍava who considered himself equal to him to step forward and fight with him.¹⁶

Bhīma took up the challenge and the duel began. Both Bhīma and Duryodhana carried on the duel strictly according to the rules. No one appeared looking for an opportunity to give a hit which violated the rules. No one took advantage of another's discomfiture. When both the fighters were tired, they rested for a while and then continued the fight.¹⁷ The Mbh. describes the duel at some length using technical terms. With blood flowing down from their bodies they are compared to two Kīṁśuka trees in full bloom. When Duryodhana at one stage struck Bhīma on his head, Bhīma did not show any sign of suffering which surprised all spectators. Some moments later, Bhīma succeeded in hitting Duryodhana on his side which forced him to kneel down on the ground.¹⁸ Bhīma at that time did not rush forward and give another decisive hit. He allowed Duryodhana to stand on his feet again. Once again Duryodhana lay unconscious on the ground due to a stroke of Bhīma. Bhīma then waited till Duryodhana regained consciousness.¹⁹ Sometime later Duryodhana was able to turn the tables on Bhīma. Bhīma not only fell on the ground unconscious but also lost his armour. That was a very dangerous situation for Bhīma. From that point onwards, Duryodhana would definitely be in a commanding position. Kṛṣṇa once again became very much concerned. He told Arjuna, who was sitting by his side, confidentially that Bhīma had no hopes of coming out victorious if he continued to fight strictly according to rules

(*yuddhadharma*). He had to take recourse to some unfair means if he wished to win. If he did not, Duryodhana was sure to be their king.²⁰

We all know what happened afterwards. Arjuna secretly gave a hint to Bhīma to strike a blow on the thigh of Duryodhana. Bhīma understood the hint correctly and carried it out successfully. What Bhīma did was contrary to the rule of *gadāyuddha*, viz. that one should not hit the opponent below the navel.²¹ Duryodhana did not expect any foul play by his opponent. Naturally, he was not particular about guarding his thighs during the duel. Actually he exposed them to Bhīma when he jumped up high on the ground to avoid a hit from Bhīma. Unfortunately for Duryodhana, Bhīma had just then decided to violate the rule and aim the mace at his opponent's thighs. Duryodhana fell down on the ground with his thighs broken, unable to stand up and continue the fight. He lost the duel and Bhīma won. The Pāṇḍavas now could have their share of the kingdom.

In this incident, as well as in the earlier one related to Droṇa, one hears certain statements which are quite opposed to the advice of the Bhāratasāvitri. There is a contradiction between what one Kṛṣṇa viz. Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana preached - one should not forsake *dharma* even to save one's life (*dharmam na tyajej jīvitasyāpi hetoḥ* 18.5.50), - and what another Kṛṣṇa, viz. Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, advised to do - one should speak untruth or act contrary to *dharma* to save one's life.

In my opinion the contradiction is only an apparent one, and not real. It disappears when one understands the two statements in their proper contexts. What Vyāsa declared was true on an absolute level. The general statement of Vyāsa, however, needed modifications in practical life. These modifications were pointed out by Kṛṣṇa in the two situations noted above. According to Kṛṣṇa, a person fighting for a just cause may have

to speak untruth or take recourse to *adharma* for the success of his cause. The Pāṇḍavas did not want war. They tried their best to avoid it. The war was thrust on them by the uncompromising Kauravas who were on the wrong side. The Pāṇḍavas were immorally deprived of their due share of kingdom and they were forced to take to arms to get it back. They were not up in arms to deprive Duryodhana of his share of kingdom. If Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma had not acted on Kṛṣṇa's advice in the two situations described above, they would have lost the war and that would have helped injustice to prevail over justice. That had to be avoided and hence the message the two incidents in the Mbh. give us through Kṛṣṇa's advice is that in an extreme case one may have to practice *adharma* for the victory of justice. What was taught on an absolute level by Vyāsa needed modification in actual practice - a distinction had to be made between *dharma* and *āpaddharma*.

I now invite your attention to a set of other incidents which occur before the war and towards the end of the war. They contain for us another message of the Mbh.

Before the war, the Pāṇḍavas made a final attempt to peacefully settle the issue between them and the Kauravas. They sent Kṛṣṇa to speak on their behalf and persuade Duryodhana to part with at least five villages, if not their entire share of the ancestral kingdom, and avert the war. Kṛṣṇa did not succeed in his mission. Before he left Hāstinapura to return to the Pāṇḍavas he met Kunti and asked her if she had any message for her sons.²² Apparently Kunti did not approve of Yudhiṣṭhira's begging for five villages and come to terms with the Kauravas. She wanted her sons to win back all that they had lost in the gambling game. The spirited mother would not let Kṛṣṇa return without a message from her to her sons. She had to tell them where their duty, their *dharma* as Kṣatriyas, lay. She wanted her sons to realize that as Kṣatriyas they were not

supposed to beg but to be up in arms and get back what was their due.²³ The war which they had to wage was not a foul game they intended to play to get something which did not belong to them, but was a duty they had to perform to wipe out the injustice done to them.

She therefore wanted Kṛṣṇa to tell the Pāṇḍavas two stories - one of King Mucakunda, which is not so well known, and the other of prince Samjaya which is quite well known. In the first story, the royal sage Mucakunda was offered as a gift the rulership of the whole earth by Vaiśravaṇa (god Kubera), but the king refused to accept what was offered to him as a gift. He did not want the rulership of the whole earth, but not as a gift. He was prepared to fight for it and win the earth on the strength of his arms.²⁴ The lesson of this story ruled out for Yudhiṣṭhira, a Kṣatriya, the option of getting his due by begging.

The next story of Samjaya ruled out the other option of total inaction.

Samjaya, a Sauvira prince, was idling his time away and not doing anything after he was deprived of his kingdom by the king of the Sindhu country. Vidurā, his spirited (*manyumati* 5.131.2) mother, then felt compelled to remind her son of his duty as a Kṣatriya. She argued with her son and exhorted him with long discourses to take up arms and fight to get back his lost kingdom.²⁵ Samjaya tried to defend his inaction on various grounds, but Vidurā would have none of them. She remained firm. Samjaya then blamed his mother for having an iron heart and asked her of what value the kingdom of the whole earth to her was if she lost her only son in the battle.²⁶ Vidurā countered this emotional plea of Samjaya by pointing out to him that if she did not ask him to do Kṣatriya's duty out of affection for him, she would be showing towards him the affection of a female ass; she would rather see Samjaya shining bright even for a moment than see him live for long in the form of smoke.²⁷ She drew her son's

attention to the fact that his name was Saṁjaya which meant 'victory', but she failed to find that meaning in the idling son. She wanted him to be true to his name, and not bear it in vain.²⁸

Vidurā finally succeeded in exhorting Saṁjaya to take up arms. He did as told and won back his lost kingdom. The message that Kuntī wanted Kṛṣṇa to convey to Yudhiṣṭhira through these stories is quite clear. She wanted him to follow the examples of Mucakunda and Saṁjaya. Yudhiṣṭhira was neither to accept five villages as gifts (as Macakunda did not accept the rulership of the earth as a gift), nor sit idle (as Saṁjaya chose to do) but act (as Saṁjaya later did). She informed Yudhiṣṭhira that the time for which a Kṣatriya woman gave birth to sons had arrived.²⁹

The same instruction regarding the duty of a Kṣatriya was given also to Arjuna in yet another incident which occurred before the Mbh. war. We are told that Arjuna unexpectedly felt perplexed on the battleground. A grave doubt arose in his mind whether it was proper for him to use arms to kill the very persons whom he should, in fact, love and respect. In a fit of remorse he decided on his own, without talking to anyone of his brothers, not to take part in the war and threw down his bow and arrow.³⁰ This was a very piquant situation for the Pāṇḍavas; Kṛṣṇa then came to their rescue. He told Arjuna that it did not behove him to act like a coward. He should muster up courage and fight, for he should realize that what was facing him was a *dharmayuddha*, a war for a just cause. In such a situation he should not think whom he was going to kill. It was his duty to kill even his elders if they sided with an unjust cause. There was nothing more beneficial for a Kṣatriya than to have to fight a *dharmayuddha*.³¹ A convinced Arjuna took up his bow and arrow and was ready to fight.³²

Was this additional dose of instruction necessary for Arjuna when Kuntī had clearly

conveyed the same thing to the Pāṇḍavas? Yes, it was, for there is an essential difference between the situation in which the Sauvira prince Saṁjaya was placed and the one faced by Arjuna. The opponents whom Saṁjaya was going to kill in the battle were in no way related to him. They were all outsiders who had done him wrong. This was not the case with Arjuna. He had to fight with his own relatives, his elders in the family, his respected teachers. Hence a doubt in his mind was justified. Arjuna, as the representative of the Pāṇḍavas, raised the question and got it clarified by his guide, Sri Kṛṣṇa, before he started to fight.

The Pāṇḍavas acted on the advice of Kuntī and Kṛṣṇa and fought the battle. But with what result! The battle lasted for full eighteen days. Many heads rolled. In the late afternoon of the eighteenth day, with the fall of Duryodhana, the battle for the Pāṇḍavas was as good as ended. They were clearly the victors. A delighted and satisfied Yudhiṣṭhira then said: "The enmity has ended; Duryodhana has been struck down; acting on the advice of Kṛṣṇa, I have won the kingdom of the earth".³³

Yudhiṣṭhira at that stage was undoubtedly justified in his feeling of satisfaction. The scales then clearly weighed heavily in favour of the Pāṇḍavas. The Kauravas had lost all their principal heroes. The list of the dead included their four generals -- Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, and Śalya, all the Kaurava brothers except only Duryodhana who, though not dead at that juncture, was incapacitated, relatives like Śakuni, Jayadratha and Bhūriśravas (a Kaurava) and their important allies like Suśarman and Bhagadatta, to name only a few. Only three heroes worth the name on their side survived, Kṛpācārya, their erstwhile teacher, Aśvatthāman, their teacher's son, and Kṛtavarman, a Yādava. None of these was even distantly related to the Kauravas.³⁴ There was little chance of any one of them continuing the battle the next day and defeat the formidable Pāṇḍavas.

On the other hand those who survived on the side of the Pāṇḍavas make a striking list. It includes Dhṛṣṭadyumna, their general of the army, and his brother Śikhandin, all the five Pāṇḍavas and their guide Sri Kṛṣṇa, all the five sons of Draupadī, and Yudhāmanyu and Uttamaujas (the two Pāṇcāla heroes). As for their army too, a fairly large number had survived. The only important losses for the Pāṇḍavas were *two of the younger generation*, Abhimanyu and Ghaṭotkaca, sons of Arjuna and Bhima respectively, and two of the older generation viz. Drupada and Virāṭa. In spite of those losses, Yudhiṣṭhira could understandably be proud of his victory.

But alas! Yudhiṣṭhira's pride was destined to be short-lived. Towards the end of the eighteenth day of the war, the surviving great heroes and ordinary soldiers on the side of the Pāṇḍavas were understandably convinced about the end of the war. That night they all slept in their camp happily and trustfully, not expecting attack from any quarter.³⁵ But that was not true. Duryodhana, though crest-fallen, was still alive. In the meeting that took place at night between him and the three surviving heroes on his side, Aśvatthāman took the vow to kill all the Pāṇcālas and sought Duryodhana's permission to carry out his resolve. The latter readily agreed and asked his teacher Kṛpācārya to get some water and anoint Aśvatthāman as his next general. As an anointed general Aśvatthāman was expected to lead on the battlefield the remaining Kaurava army the next day. Instead, he chose to massacre his opponents that very night while they were all asleep, totally unprepared for an attack. Aśvatthāman was helped in this cruel act by Kṛpācārya, his maternal uncle, and by Kṛtavarmaṇ, Kauravas' Yādava ally, who had no reason to be soft towards the Pāṇcāla army. It is not necessary to go into the details of the gory incident. Suffice it to say that the trio did not allow any one sleeping in the camp to remain alive. Only the charioteer of Dhṛṣṭadyumna managed to escape from the

camp to report the incident to the Pāṇḍavas.

The scales which only hours before weighed heavily in favour of the jubilant Pāṇḍavas were almost made even by Aśvatthāman the last general of the Kauravas. Hearing the news from Aśvatthāman, Duryodhana died with satisfaction. He congratulated Aśvatthāman for doing what Bhisma, Droṇa and even Karna could not. With Duryodhana's death the war had really come to an end. This fact was signalled by Saṁjaya's losing his *divyaḍṛṣṭi* just at that point (10.9.52-58). The *divyaḍṛṣṭi* was meant for war-reportings. With the end of the war, Saṁjaya needed it no more.

The situation was very different for the Pāṇḍavas. If Duryodhana was satisfied with what had happened that night, Yudhiṣṭhira completely broke down when the incident was reported to him. He fell unconscious. When he regained consciousness his first reaction was: "those who, we thought, were defeated have won. We thought we had won, but we are, (in fact), defeated, ... our (so-called) victory was only in name, it is therefore as good as defeat".³⁶

This is how the Mbh. war ended with victory on neither side. The Pāṇḍavas acted as advised by Kuntī and Kṛṣṇa, but their exercise proved futile. They did not achieve victory in the true sense of the term. A question therefore may be asked: Was such a futile exercise worth undertaking? We have seen what the war meant in terms of loss of life. Should all this not have been avoided?

It seems to me that the answer to this question has been provided by the Mbh. and in that answer we have the second message which the epic narrative wants to convey. It tells us very positively through Kuntī and Kṛṣṇa that one has to rise up and fight for a just cause irrespective of the consequences. Since the war was forced on the Pāṇḍavas by their adversaries, they could not get away from it. As Kṣatriyas the only course

open to them was to do their duty. The result was not in their hands. They, of course, hoped to win the war, but they did not know who on their side was going to live. As made clear by Vidurā to her son Samjaya, one had to fight against injustice even if in the course of the fight one were to lose one's life. Undoubtedly Kuntī had the same message for the Pāṇḍavas, Kṛṣṇa too made quite clear to Arjuna that he had to consider both the possibilities -- either he dies or he wins (6.24.37). Kṛṣṇa too was thus not sure that Arjuna would survive. As it happened, in spite of the disaster in the camp, not only Arjuna but all the five Pāṇḍavas survived to rule the earth. However, they could not avoid the final blow in spite of the fact that they could count on the best advice of their Yogeśvara Kṛṣṇa. Truly did Yudhiṣṭhira say that even those gifted with divine sight could not fathom the course of the events to come (*durvidā gatir arthānām api ye divyacakṣuṣaḥ* 10.10.10).

It is therefore possible to say that the famous Gitā teaching *karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana* (6.24.47) is implicit in the second message of the Mbh. The Gitā tells us that a man's authority extends to doing his duty, but not to the outcome of it. The first part of the Gitā teaching is quite explicit in the advice given by Vidurā and Kuntī to their sons. Only the second one is implied. I believe we could have got the Gitā message all right from the Mbh. narrative even without the Gitā. The Mbh. narrative is an example of what the Gitā teaches.

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I have detailed so long for you what according to me is the message of the Mbh. I shall now tell you what the late Dr. V. S. Sukthankar, the undisputed authority on the epic studies, has to say almost on a similar theme. More than fifty years ago he delivered four lectures on the topic: "On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata".³⁷ The lectures were delivered in 1942 under the auspices of the University of Bombay and were posthumously published fifteen years later (1957)

by the Asiatic Society of Bombay. Dr. Sukthankar treated the theme quite differently from what I have done. For his treatment he took as basis the whole epic poem as it stands today (with its quite obvious additions) and not, as I have done, what may be considered the 'nucleus' of the epic poem. Dr. Sukthankar has dealt with the theme of the meaning of the Mahābhārata on three different planes, depending on how one looks at the epic battle -- (1) the mundane plane, (2) the ethical plane, and (3) the metaphysical plane.

On the mundane plane, says Dr. Sukthankar, the Mbh. is "essentially a story of the heroic age, ringing with battle cries and enlivened with thrilling vicissitudes of war" (p. 58). But a mere description of war could not be the main interest of the epic poem. What is of interest are the characters of the Mbh. -- how they behave in given situations. This is what attracts our mind. This factor has no doubt contributed to making the Mbh. a composition of outstanding merit. But, according to Dr. Sukthankar, this alone will not suffice to explain the sustained interest the book has evoked in the whole nation throughout the centuries. For this we have to look for some more serious purpose in the book.

So Dr. Sukthankar turns his attention to the next plane -- the epic story on the ethical plane. He says that the characters of the Mbh., Yudhiṣṭhira and his allies on the one side and Duryodhana and his allies on the other, are, according to the Mbh., really gods and demons who had appeared in human form (1.61;15.39.5-16;18.5.9-24). By telling this Dr. Sukthankar turns our attention from the mundane to the ethical plane, for the epic conflict now takes the form of a conflict between gods and demons, between the moral way of life as represented by Yudhiṣṭhira and the immoral way of life as represented by Duryodhana. Through the epic story, Dr. Sukthankar feels, Vyāsa wants to portray the eternal conflict between *sat* and *asat* -- a conflict which occurred in the times before

the Mbh., which occurs in the Mbh., and which will also occur in future, a conflict which occurs again and again in new guises at different times and different places. The poem has a high ethical purpose and when the epic poem is looked at from this point of view the didactic parts of the epic do not strike us as foreign to it. They are intended to be right there to win us over to the side of the truth, to the side of *dharma*. The ordinary war between humans “has been deepened into a cosmic war between the Devas and the Asuras... the ceaseless opposition between Good and Evil, between Justice and Injustice, between Dharma and Adharma” (p. 89).

From this ethical plane, Dr. Sukthankar takes the story to a still higher plane, the metaphysical plane. Apparently, he is not satisfied with the meaning he obtained from the Mbh. on the ethical plane. He therefore wants us to note that the human characters on the mundane plane which became Devas and Asuras on the ethical plane are, in Indian concept, not really different from each other but are complementary processes emerging from the same ultimate source, the Brahman. For this, we have to understand the symbolism of Arjuna and Kṛiṣṇa. The epic tells us that they are incarnations of Nara and Nārāyaṇa respectively, i.e. the Man and the Supreme Being.

In other words, they are the incarnations of Jivātman and Paramātman. The epic war, in this light, is a projection of the psychological conflict within a man himself. In order to substantiate his point that the epic war is a projection of the conflict within man, Dr. Sukthankar points out that the epic war was fought on the Kurukṣetra and the word used for human body in the Gītā is *kṣetra* which is the place of the conflict (*idam śarīram kaunteya kṣetram ity abhidhīyate* 6.35.1). This inner significance of the Mbh. events when viewed on the metaphysical plane, asserts Dr. Sukthankar, is of far greater interest than the one on the mundane, or even the ethical plane.

Dr. Sukthankar asserts that it is only this way that one “will be able to understand and interpret the Mahābhārata, and that all attempts to explain it merely as an evolue of some hypothetical epic nucleus are merely examples of wasted ingenuity” (pp.109-110). I humbly beg to differ. I am not going to offer you today my critique of Dr. Sukthankar’s views. That can be the subject of a separate talk. I shall end only by saying that in spite of Dr. Sukthankar’s views, I have ventured to give expression to my opinion on what constitutes the nucleus of the Mbh. and what message the nucleus has for us.

Notes

1. *saṅgrāme prayojanayoddhrbhyaḥ* Pāṇini 4.2.56. Patañjali does not comment on this *sūtra*. *Kāśikā* gives as example *bhārataḥ*. The meaning of the example is given in the Siddhāntakaumudi: *bhārataḥ yoddhāraḥ asya saṅgrāmasya*.
2. This expression is actually found in *tan* (i.e. *enah*) *mahābhārataḥ śrutiḥ pravilīyate* 1.56.30, also cf. 1.56.32 (*mahābhārataḥ śrutiḥ pravilīyate*).
3. 1.54.21-24.
4. Also cf. *bhedo rājyavināśaś ca jayaś ca jayatām vara* 1.55.43.
5. 1.1.63; 1.57.74-75.
6. 18.5.46.
7. *mātāpitṛsahasrāṇi putradāraśatāni ca/ samśāreṣv anubhūṭāni yānti yāsyanti cāpare// harṣasthānasahasrāṇi bhayasthānaśatāni ca/ divase divase mūḍham āviśanti na paṇḍitam//* 18.5.47-48.
8. *ūrdhvaḥ virāmy eṣa na ca kaścīd chṛṇoti*

- me/dharmād arthaś ca kāmaś ca sa kim-
artham na sevyate// 18.5.49.*
9. *na jātu kāmān na bhāyān na lobhād
dharmam tyajej jīvitasyāpi hetoḥ/ nityo
dharmaḥ sukhaduḥkṣe tv anitye jīvo nityo
hetur asya tv anityaḥ// 18.5.50.*
10. *pāṇḍaveyā mahārāja nāśamīsur vijayam
tadā// kaccid drono na naḥ sarvān kṣapayet
paramāstravit// 7.164. 63-64.*
11. *āsthīyatām jaye yogo dharmam utsrjya
pāṇḍava/ yathā vaḥ samyuge sarvān na
hanyād rukmavāhanaḥ/ 7.164.68.*
12. *aśvatthāmni hate naiṣa yudhyed iti matir
mama/ tam hatam samyuge kaścid asmai
śamīsatu mānavaḥ// 7.164.69.*
13. *śaṅkamānaḥ sa tan mithyā vīryajñāḥ svasuta-
sya vai/hataḥ sa iti ca śrutvā naiva dhairyād
akampata// 7.164.75.*
14. *yady arhadivasam droṇo yudhyate manyum
āsthitaḥ/ satyam bravīmi te senā vināśam
samupaiśyati// sa bhavāmiś trātu no droṇāt
satyāj jyāyo 'nṛtam bhavet/anṛtam jīvita-
syārthe vadan na sprśyate 'nṛtaiḥ// 7.164.
98-99.*
15. 2.67.18-21.
16. *saṁnaddhaḥ sa gadī rājan sajjah
saṁgrāmamūrdhani/abravīt pāṇḍavān
sarvān putro duryodhanas tava//bhrātṛñām
bhavatām eko yudhyatām gadayā mayā/...
gadāyuddhe na me kaścit sadṛśo 'stīti
cintaya/... grhṇātu sa gadām yo vai yudhyate
'dya mayā saha// 9.31.56-60.*
17. 9.56. 6-7.
18. *atādayad bhīmasenaḥ pārśve duryodhanam
tadā/sa vihvalaḥ prahāreṇa jānubhyām
agaman mahīm// 9.56.53.*
19. *sa bhīmasenābhīhataḥ tavātmajaḥ papāta
saṁkampitadehabandhanaḥ/ ...tataḥ sutas
te pratilabhya cetanām samutpapāta ... 9.56.
61-62.*
20. *bhīmasenas tu dharmeṇa yudhyamāno na
jeśyati/anyāyena tu yudhyān vai hanyād
eṣa suyodhanam// 9.57.4; evam cen na
mahābāhur anyāyena haniśyati/eṣa vaḥ kau-
ravo rājā dhārtarāṣṭro bhaviśyati// 9.57.17.*
21. *adho nābhyā na hantavyam iti śāstrasya
nīscayaḥ 9.59.6.*
22. 5.130.4.
23. *rājadharmān avekṣasva pitṛpaitāmahocitān/
/naitad rājaśvīrtam hi yatra tvam sthātum
icchasi// 5.130.19; bhaikṣam vipratīśiddham
te... pitṛyam amśam mātābāho nimagnm
punar uddhara/ ... yudhyasva rājadharmeṇa
5.130. 29-30, 32.*
24. 5.130. 8-10.
25. 5.131-5.134.14
26. *kim nu te mām apaśyantyāḥ prthivyā api sar-
vathā 5.131.36.*
27. *tam tvām ayaśasā sprśtam na brūyam
yadi samjaya/ kharivātsalyam āhus tan
nihsāmarthyam ahetukam// 5.133.6; mā
dhūmāya jvalātyantam ākramya jahi
śātravān/ jvala mūrdhany amitṛāṇām
muhūrtam api vā kṣaṇam// 5.131.29.*
28. *samjaya nāmataś ca tvam na ca paśyāmi
tat tvayi/ anvarthanāmā bhava me putra mā
vyarthanāmakaḥ// 5.132.7. Perhaps, Kunti too
implied that her son Yudhiṣṭhira ('steady in
battle') should prove true to his name.*
29. *yadartham kṣatriyā sūte tasya kālo 'yam*

āgataḥ 5.135.9.

30. *evam uktvārjunah samīkhye rathopastha
upāviśat/ viśrjya saśaramī cāpam...//
6.23.47; na yotsya iti govindam uktvā
tūṣṇim babhūva ha// 6.24.9.*
31. *dharmyād dhi yuddhāc chreyo 'nyat
kṣatriyasya na vidyate 6.24.31; tasmād
uttiṣṭha kaunteya yuddhāya kṛtaniścayaḥ
6.24.37.*
32. *sthito 'smi gatasamdehaḥ kariṣye vacanam
tava 6.40.73.*
33. *gatam vairasya nidhanam hato rājā
suyodhanah/kṛṣṇasya matam āsthāya
vijiteyam vasundharā// 9.59.43.*

34. That Yuyutsu, the son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra by a Vaiśyā, had survived is beside the point. He had deserted the Kauravas and joined the side of the Pāṇḍavas before the war (6.41.90-95).

35. *adya svapsyanti pāñcālā viśvastā jitakaśinah/
vimuktayugyakavacā harṣeṇa ca
samanvitāḥ// 10.3.25*

36. *jīyamānā jayanty anye jayamānā vayam
jitāḥ... jayo 'yam ajayākāro jayas tasmāt
parājayaḥ// 10.10.10,12.*

37. The Asiatic Society of Bombay, Town Hall, Mumbai 400001. Actually only three lectures were delivered by Dr. Sukthankar. The fourth could not be delivered on account of his sudden and sad death on the morning of the day on which the lecture was to be delivered.